



When Dennis Brandt hears a distant train whistle or the rumble of wheels on rails, he's taken back to the rural area of Wisconsin where he spent his childhood.

There, such sounds accompanied him as he played and worked around his family's farm.

"We heard it coming through . . . and chugging along," said Brandt, who did institutional research at Northeast Community College prior to retiring a few years ago.

His interest in railroads piqued in the 1950s when his father presented him with a his own Lionel train set, which, Brandt said, he "ran for years and years."

The amount of time Brandt had to spend with trains waned as he aged and took on more responsibilities. But he couldn't completely ignore the call of the whistle. In the late 1990s, he started collecting, building, buying and selling model railroad memorabilia.

Today rails, buildings and vegetation cover a ledge that runs around the perimeter of a room in his garage. And on the tracks are several trains, some of which appear to be climbing mountains, crossing ravines and stopping in replicas of real towns to take on passengers, livestock, and water.

Brandt constructs many of the buildings in his “towns” from scratch — one board at a time. The activity reminds him of the days when he worked in the construction business, he said.

It’s just “basic housing construction, which I enjoyed very much,” Brandt added.

Since some of Brandt’s towns and stations are fashioned after locations in Colorado, he’s created mountains and hills out of chicken wire that he covered with plaster cloth and painted.

Brandt often uses old photos of actual places as guides for his towns and stations. Some, he said, are a compilation of several actual locations — a store from one may be positioned with a depot from another and an ice house from a third.

Brandt buys details — such as people, livestock and vehicles — from vendors who sell online or at gatherings of model railroad fans.

One of his scenes represents Cimmaron, Colo., which was a hub for livestock transportation well into the early 20th century. During the 1930s, the woman running the restaurant there could identify the engineer on the train by the sound of the train whistle.

“She had his food waiting for him,” Brandt said.

Brandt also makes and sells a line of plaster buildings that are designed by Tom York, a friend and fellow model railroad fan who once worked as an artist for the Walt Disney Company.